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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000403

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DEPARTMENT FOR DAS BRYZA, EUR/CARC, AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2018

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: RULING PARTY AGAINST CHANGING ELECTORAL SYSTEM,
AGAIN

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador and other Embassy officials raised the issue of the newly proposed Parliamentary electoral system with key MPs on March 11. Speaker Burjanadze told Ambassador Tefft that some in the opposition are now calling for a return to the "winner-take-all" system, although the most recent proposal to have 75 single-seat majoritarian seats and 75 party list seats is now on its second reading in Parliament. Separately, influential MP Giga Bokeria told PolEcon Chief that there is "zero chance" that the Parliament would change the proposal. He claimed the ruling party had bent over backwards to try to get the opposition to negotiate a deal -- including by releasing one of the November 7 protesters who was caught on tape smashing a rock over the head of a policeman -- only to have the opposition miss two opportunities to vote on it. Separately, Bokeria said that the election date would be set within two weeks. He reiterated the seriousness of Russia's lifting of the sanctions on Abkhazia, calling it the "next chapter of annexation" and saying that Georgia would not tolerate it. End summary.

¶2. (C) On March 11, Ambassador raised with Speaker Burjanadze the newly proposed and controversial Parliamentary electoral system. Burjanadze said that some in the opposition are now calling for Parliament to return to the "winner-take-all" system. Still, the Parliament's proposal for 75 single-seat majoritarian seats and 75 party list seats was already in its second hearing. Although she indicated that negotiations continued, influential MP Giga Bokeria told PolEcon Chief the same day that there is "zero chance" that Parliament would change its proposal. He claimed that the ruling United National Movement (UNM) had bent over backwards to try to get the opposition to negotiate a deal -- including by releasing one of the November 7 protesters who was caught on tape smashing a rock over the head of a policeman -- only to have the opposition miss two opportunities to change the system by failing to show up to vote on it.

¶3. (C) Bokeria said that UNM had serious opposition within his own party to the earlier proposal for 50 single-seat majoritarian seats and 100 party list seats as there had been representatives to Parliament from all 75 districts since Georgia's independence. These people did not want to give up their seats. We gave Bokeria a copy of an analysis of the district populations (sent to EUR/CARC) which showed that under the proposal the UNM could win 88 percent of the seats with only 54 percent of the vote assuming district's vote roughly in the same proportions as the presidential elections. This likely result was also due in part to the fact that the pro-UNM rural districts have more seats relative to their populations than urban areas. Bokeria conceded that the earlier proposal was better for the opposition, speculating that it would have given the opposition 40 seats out of 150 rather than the likely 35 they

will obtain under the current one. When we suggested that this current proposal would likely perpetuate the dominance of a single party, which was not helpful to Georgian democracy overall, Bokeria countered that the problem is that reform would stop should the opposition gain enough seats to block ruling party votes. A real opposition to UNM, he said, would come out of its break-up, rather than out of the existing opposition parties.

¶4. (C) On elections more generally, we gave Bokeria a copy of the OSCE Ambassadors letter and election checklist (sent to EUR/CARC). He said that the elections would be set within two weeks, with the elections to take place 60 days from that date. Although the electoral code was not complete, it would be done by the time the election is called. We urged Bokeria against changing the protocols in ways which would make them less transparent, by for example, taking off data such as the number of registered voters. Bokeria said that the Parliament is working to simplify the protocols by placing everything on one page but would not take away information. He said that there would also be opposition representation in the District Election Commissions (a key demand of the opposition) and that they would eliminate same-day registrants, which were the source of a lot of problems during vote tabulation.

¶5. (C) Bokeria raised Russia's March 7 lifting of sanctions on Abkhazia, calling the step "very, very serious." He saw the move the "next chapter of annexation" and said that Georgia would not tolerate it. When asked whether he thought things between Russia and Georgia would be better under President Medvedev, Bokeria said he had been optimistic but now believed that the whole recent meeting between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili took place in order to allow Russia to

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say that it had warned Georgia that Russia was going to lift sanctions on Abkhazia.

TEFFT